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ABSTRACT

United States educational history is full of uncertain reform attempts beginning with colonial New England's school reform goal of salvation in this world as a preparation for eternal life in the next. A more practical type of education characterized the Early National Period. Monitorial schools and communal schools, as in New Harmony, Indiana, preceded the common school movement, the major nineteenth century school reform. Led by Horace Mann in Massachusetts, Henry Barnard in Connecticut and Rhode Island, and similar leaders in other states, the common school was open to all, state tax supported, and in time, compulsory. The reform was spread by Jacksonian democrats, newspapers and educational journals, and enlightened speakers on the American lyceum circuit in town halls across the nation. Changing conditions, 1893-1918, transformed the high school from an elite to a plebeian, multipurpose, comprehensive institution. The child-centered progressive education movement, 1890s-1930s, also had a leveling effect. Reformed to meet the multiple needs of mass enrollments, the high school inevitably lowered its academic standards for the average and below average. In times of national crisis many so-called school reforms appeared briefly. Today hard choices and creative solutions potentially may confer upon teachers the authority, autonomy, responsibility, and respect that they deserve. (BZ)

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# SCHOOL REFORM: PAST AND PRESENT

BY

FRANKLIN PARKER

1986

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# School Reform: Past and Present

by Franklin Parker

## School Reform 1983

Our schools are being "eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future," begins A Nation at Risk.[1] If an enemy had imposed on us the "mediocre educational performance that exists," we would see "it as an act of war." "Unthinkingly," we imposed mediocrity on ourselves, implied the report, by dismantling post-Sputnik basic education gains, thus weakening our schools, disarming ourselves, mortgaging our future, and causing job losses at home, foreign trade imbalance, and military weakness in the face of U.S.S.R. strength.

The implied culprits responsible for schools' "rising tide of mediocrity" must have been advocates of the open classroom movement (1965-75); the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, with its massive federal aid to poor school districts; the 1964 Job Corps and Project Headstart; school integration after 1954; the child-centered Progressive Education Movement of the 1930s; and earlier liberal-progressive school movements.

Grave school faults were cited: 13% of all 17-year-olds and 40% of minority youths, plus 23 million adults, are functionally illiterate; Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores dropped, 1963-80, with consistent declines in English, math, and science; and complaints are made about costly remedial programs required in colleges, industry, and the military. Reforms needed, said the Nation at Risk writers, are to reinstate basic education, lengthen the school day and year, hold educators and officials accountable for all students' mastering four years of high school English, three years each of math, science, and social studies, one-half year of computer science, and, for the college bound, two years of a foreign language.[2]

A Nation at Risk stimulated the national debate about school reform, kept President Reagan from abolishing the President Carter-National Education Association (NEA) backed cabinet-level Education Department, and moved public schools further toward the center of national politics.

After A Nation at Risk set the tone for current school reform, 43 states raised high school graduation requirements, 37 states assessed student achievement, 30 states raised teacher certification requirements (many included teacher competency tests), and 300 state-level education study groups adopted key national report recommendations, with more recommendations of their own. High school curriculum stressed English, math, and science; electives, personal development, and entertainment courses dropped; SAT and American College Testing scores rose.

Taken for granted in good times, schools are frequently blamed for bad times. Reform becomes politically fashionable. Schools are highly visible, touch many lives, involve many people, and are central to our way of life. The optimistic belief is: reform schools and you reform society.

Teacher education was the major concern in the 1986 second wave of school reform reports,[3] which recommended replacing the undergraduate education degree with an arts or science major, adding a graduate education degree, and creating a professional teacher career ladder. This recommendation was made by both the Holmes Group of prestigious research university deans of education, in Tomorrow's Teachers, and the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy report, A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century. The Carnegie Forum proposed a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (now at work) specifically to plan a graduate teachers' career ladder, starting licensed teachers at $15,000 for 10 months, paying more for experienced certified teachers, still more pay for advanced certified teachers, and finally paying "lead" teachers $72,000 for 12 months to direct other teachers and to run schools.

Dire reasons for school reform in the 1986 reports included: U.S. loss of world markets; low-skilled jobs going abroad; and increasing dropouts, functional illiterates, and other unemployable youths. The reports urged more academic rigor, discipline, motivation, and achievement. The forceful National Governors' Association (NGA) report, Time for Results,

endorsed Holmes Group and Carnegie Forum recommendations; dramatically asked states to take over "bankrupt" school districts that fail to meet standards; and justified this drastic step because Americans are losing jobs to Japan, Korea, and other countries whose children go to school more, learn more, are more literate, and later outproduce our workers. The NGA challenge was clear: our future depends on schools' giving the many the same high quality of education historically reserved for the fortunate few.

Said NGA chairman, Tennessee's then Governor Lamar Alexander: "We need better jobs in the South . . . To get these jobs we need better schools." His education improvement plan paid off in General Motors' $5 billion Saturn auto plant at Spring Hill, Tennessee, a site chosen over 1,000 others considered in 30 states. One reason for the choice, a General Motors spokesman said, was Tennessee's commitment to excellence in education," referring to its pioneer Teachers Career Ladder program which, through merit pay, raised top teachers' salaries to $45,000 a year.[4]

The new initiative is from governors and legislators concerned with state job losses and from corporate industry needing trained manpower to improve the domestic economy, overcome foreign trade deficits, and pay for a costly arms race. These now lead such traditional school reform initiators as professional educators, parents, the public, and the federal government. Federal aid to education, lowest in 20 years, fell during the Reagan years, 1980-86, from 9% to 6.5% of total public school funding.

Business interest in school reform, heralded in the Committee for Economic Development report, Investing in Our Children: Business and the Public Schools, September 1985, was best expressed by American Can Company executive William S. Woodside. He urged business people to visit schools, "get a sense of how many demands are made on the time of a teacher or an administrator." The corporate world, he said, needs to focus "on the political arena, because it is where the major decisions are going to be made about the funds, priorities and programs that will be so critical to the future of our system of public education." Critical of Education Secretary

William J. Bennett's proposed vouchers for low income children to use private schools, Woodside told businessmen instead to elect officials who will provide "public funds for public education."

To reform or upgrade schools is not a new rallying cry. Many hoped that schools would help solve economic problems in the Depression and would strengthen national defense after Sputnik. Schools alone could work no miracles. American educational history is full of uncertain reform attempts, as the following shows.

## Past School Reforms[5]

### Colonial Period: Religious Education

Said Puritan leader John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay Colony: we are a city set on a hill, a model for the world. Salvation was the early school reform goal of colonial New England, with John Calvin's Geneva the ideal, a City of God, a Protestant theocracy. Colonial learning centered on salvation in this world as a preparation for eternal life in the next: the Bible, sermon, reading schools, writing schools, dame schools, Massachusetts school laws of 1642 and 1647, the hornbook, the New England Primer, Latin grammar schools and textbooks, and Harvard and the other colonial colleges, 8 of the 9 denominationally controlled before the American Revolution.

### Early National Period: Practical Education

But diverse ethnic groups, religious views, sectionalism, and economic pressures soon redirected school reform toward practical needs, as in Benjamin Franklin's 1751 Philadelphia Academy. Here English and mathematics were to balance Latin, surveying and navigation studies were to help make fortunes in land speculation and in clipper ship trade. Mechanic arts, industrial training, engineering, and commercial schools extended practical education. Problems in teaching "everything useful and everything ornamental" (Franklin's phrase) have recurred often in American education.

### Monitorial Schools, 1805-40s

Charity schools for poor children were an early 19th century reform effort. Quaker Joseph Lancaster's monitorial schools, begun in England, became popular in the U.S. Ten older monitors

coached earlier in the lesson could each supervise ten pupils, so that one teaching master could instruct 100 and more poor children at benches practicing their ABCs, sums, and sentences. Monitorial schools were quick, cheap, and spread from Massachusetts to Georgia. The New York Free School Society under President De Witt Clinton collected donations to pay for monitorial schools for New York City's poorer children, 1805-40s. Monitorial schools instilled morality, taught discipline, and reduced delinquency, especially in the larger cities. Said Lancaster, "Let every child at every moment have something to do and a motive for doing it." Said De Witt Clinton about Lancaster, "I consider his system as creating a new era in education, and as a blessing sent down from heaven to redeem the poor."

**Common School Movement**

Monitorial schools and communal schools, as in New Harmony, Indiana, preceded the common school movement, the major 19th century school reform. Led by Horace Mann in Massachusetts, Henry Barnard in Connecticut and Rhode Island, and similar leaders in other states, the common school was open to all, state tax supported, and in time, compulsory. It was shaped by 19th century complexities: economic, social, political, and religious. In promising unity amid diversity, the common schools were part of the age of Jackson and the common man, the time of the popular vote and the need for informed citizens. That was also a time of building canals, railroads, the telegraph, and other internal improvements. Reform was alive in the abolition of slavery, the temperance movement, and in improved prisons and the treatment of the mentally ill. Abroad, Prussia, leading German state, began compulsory education in 1812; France and England had state supported elementary schools by 1833.

Horace Mann and the others convinced the factory owner, farmer, church school and private school advocate, taxpayer-citizen, believer in limited government, the rich who disliked paying to educate indigent neghbors' children, the Roman Catholic who feared pervasive Protestantism, and others. Opponents were won over by the promise that common schools could offer unity, sustain American culture, perpetuate representative government, promote free enterprise, and instill

morality. The reform was spread by Jacksonian democrats, newspapers and educational journals, and enlightened speakers on the American lyceum circuit in town halls across the nation.

**High School Reform, 1893-1918: Academic to Comprehensive**

After the 1874 Kalamazoo, Michigan, decision gave legal status to the high school as a tax-supported institution, its academic focus was sanctioned by the 1893 NEA Committee of Ten report, dominated by Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, chairman, and other higher education members. Its narrow college preparatory curriculum was deemed best for both those entering college and those going to work, even though most dropped out before graduation. Here was a close parallel to the 1980s, when the power structure set school reform toward a higher academic standard.

Changing conditions, 1893-1918, transformed the high school from an elite to a plebeian-multipurpose-comprehensive institution. The change was brought about by increased industrialization, immigration, and urbanization; rapid high school growth; child development studies by G. Stanley Hall and others who justified a 6-3-3 school ladder (separate junior and senior high schools) to meet adolescent needs; vocationalism and home economics advanced by the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917; Frank Parson's vocational guidance movement in Boston, 1908; Harvard University's Hugo Munsterberg's early testing movement; smaller school boards that replaced average citizen members with civic elites (business, financial, professional); shifting school control from local party influence (which had responded to local needs) to efficiency-minded school managers who used tests as sorting devices to move the few bright into academic programs for college entrance and the professions and the majority into vocational programs for lower level and intermediate jobs.

Post World War I America, reaching for industrial and world leadership, had replaced Horace Mann's common schools for all with differentiated programs in comprehensive high schools, a transformation confirmed by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education report, Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, 1918. The child-centered progressive education movement, 1890s-1930s, also had a leveling effect. Reformed to meet the multiple needs of mass

enrollments, the American high school inevitably lowered its academic standards for the average and below average.

Later pressures to reform public schools, most of them short lived, can be simply listed:

--Americanization, and health and hygiene, increasingly after the Civil War;

--social reconstruction, advocated by Counts, Rugg, and others in the 1930s;

--essential subjects after 1938; called "basic education" since the late 1950s;

--patriotism, loyalty, discipline, religious and moral values, usual since colonial times, heavily endorsed in the 1980s;

--area studies: Asia, Africa, Latin America, especially after World War II;

--inquiry learning, urged by psychologist Jerome Bruner and other new math, new physics, new biology, and new chemistry advocates after 1950 when National Science Foundation grants became available;

--Black studies, women's studies, since the 1960s and '70s;

--the open classroom by neoprogressives, 1965-75;

--alternative schools, first by progressive liberals in the 1960s and '70s, then as private academies by white parents to avoid integrated schools in the '70s, and by fundamentalists to include religious studies in the '80s;

--behavioral objectives, urged by B.F. Skinner and others;

--accountability, urged by fiscal and other administrative conservatives;

--vouchers, tuition tax credits, and school prayer favored by President Reagan and other conservatives;

--equal time for "creation science," by fundamentalists to counter the teaching of evolution;

--and many others.

Skeptics ask: what happened to teachers' centers, prominent under the Carter Administration; career education, popular under Education Commissioner Sidney Marland, Jr.; team teaching, part of the open classroom; home teaching by concerned parents, advocated a few years ago by John Holt and

others? In times of national crisis many so-called school reforms burst forth to light the sky but fail to solve fundamental problems and are often short-lived.[6]

Skeptics about the success of 1980s school reform view the barrage of critical reports as a massive media blitz. They doubt that the new coalition of state politicians and industry can ever possibly coordinate a reform effort that combines the many competing interest groups who make up and affect U.S. public schools. They point to some 13,000 diverse school districts in 50 economically unequal states and the thousands of competing, self-serving professional education groups (subject area and administrative groups, universities and colleges, teacher unions, and others). The inertia seems too great, and the shibboleth about changing a curriculum being as difficult as moving a graveyard seems too true.

Skeptics say that even if massive efforts to upgrade school standards partially succeed, they will mainly affect and only slightly enlarge the limited pool of the brightest few. Not many more of average ability and fewer of those of below average ability will be able to meet raised standards. The bell curve will hold. As standards rise, dropouts will increase, especially among minorities and other disadvantaged. In 1940 (good old days of traditionally tough school standards) the high school dropout rate was 76%.[7] A dropout now is far worse off than one was in 1940. The highly motivated and academically bright succeed with or without school reform. Forced academic feeding hurts the low ability and low income majority. Vast funds that massive reform will require ought not to be wasted but ought to be used to remediate those on the bottom, say skeptics.

Obstacles are indeed formidable: take the teacher shortage and teacher quality, for instance. U.S. public schools will need 1.1 million new teachers in the next seven years, or 23% of each college graduating class well into the 1990s. But only 4.5% of college students in 1985 said they planned to become teachers. Also, the college talent pool is limited: no profession, let alone education, can bid successfully for the brightest 25% of college graduates--not medicine or industry or law or the military. What's to be done, then?

Graveyards are moved; curricula do change; revolutions do happen. By every yardstick, current school reform seems deep, wide, and powerfully urged. The reform reports are not attacks by enemies but by friends, potential allies, by people who care about public schools. No major report recommended tuition-tax credits or vouchers; all accept public education as the main delivery system by which to raise new generations. School reform has lasted and mounted in intensity for some years; course requirements have stiffened, and teacher salaries and state school budgets are up--some significantly.

Medical education was in a sorry state and the medical profession much less respected 76 years ago. The Flexner report of 1910, Carnegie sponsored and prepared by a non-physician, helped transform once scandalous medical schools, helped create rigorous programs with a substantial knowledge and clinical base, helped raise entrance standards, and helped establish self-policing state medical certification boards. Authority, autonomy, responsibility, and respect followed.[8]

Hard choices and creative solutions can do the same for teachers. Other professions have shortages but find ways to serve without sacrificing standards. Give no emergency or temporary teacher certificates to the ill-prepared, despite the shortage; just as no emergency medical or law credentials go to ill-prepared doctors or lawyers. Just as some qualified teachers now volunteer to coach students, so might qualified teachers be asked to teach one additional period after school for extra pay, as one way out of the coming teacher shortage. Increasing class size, lengthening the school day, tapping the altruism of qualified teachers (with extra pay) are better solutions for some years than putting a generation of children into the hands of unqualified teachers. Such temporary expediencies would provide time for the creation by Holmes Group, Carnegie Forum, and other leaders of a sound national teacher board certification process, a truly reconstructed teaching profession, consisting of certified teachers as highly paid professionals, assisted by interns and instructors and computer lab technicians, aided by paraprofessionals and clerical and administrative staff, helped by tutors and volunteers.

The best of the reform reports hold up this vision, and some very bright people are working on ways to achieve it, including AFT President Albert Shanker, who said, "We have before us the great possibility of forever transforming the lives of teachers and students in America."[9] Americans may be ready to accept Henry Brooks Adams' wise comment, "Teachers affect eternity. They can never tell where their influence stops."[10]

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1. My interpretation of the opening paragraphs of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983).

2. Ibid.; major reports through 1983 are described in Franklin Parker, "Educational Issue: A Nation at Risk and School Reform," Alpha Delta Kappan, XIV, No. 1 (May, 1984), pp. 32-33; "Finding Your Way Through the Education Reports," National Forum: The Phi Kappa Phi Journal, LXIV, No. 2 (Spring, 1984), pp. 42-43.

3. Major reports are described in Franklin Parker, "Education," Encyclopedia Americana Annual 1987 (Danbury, CT: Grolier, in press, 1987).

4. Arizona Daily Sun (Flagstaff), August 24, 1986, p. 4.

5. Particularly rich in school reform interpretations: Joel Spring, The American School 1642l-1985 (New York: Longman, 1986); also Gerald L. Gutek, Education in the United States: An Historical Perspective (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

6. See also Franklin Parker, "Where Have All the Innovations Gone?" Educational Studies, VII, No. 3 (Fall, 1976), pp. 237-243; and Franklin Parker, "What Happens to Educational Trends in a Time of Scarcity?" Journal of Thought, X, No. 4 (November, 1975), pp. 327-332.

7. Albert Shanker, "Our Profession, Our Schools: The Case for Fundamental Reform," American Educator, X, No. 3 (Fall, 1986), pp. 10-17, 44-46.

8. Franklin Parker, "Abraham Flexner, Idealist," Proceedings of the Southwestern Philosophy of Education Society, X and XI (1959-1960), pp. 16-27; "Abraham Flexner (1886-1959) and Medical Education," Journal of Medical Education, XXXVI, No. 6 (June, 1961), pp. 709-714; "Abraham Flexner, 1886-1959," History of Education Quarterly, II, No. 4 (December, 1962), pp. 199-209.

9. Shanker, op. cit., p. 45.

10. Quoted by University of Missouri President C. Peter Magrath in Rebecca Yount, Editor, Partnership for Excellence: School/College Collaboration and Building Integrated Teacher Education Systems Statewide: Proceedings, 1985 Summer Institute, Council of Chief State School Officers (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 1986), p. 32.